

INTRODUCTION

"How I Write Such Great Stories"

The paradox about publishing with a small press is that you have a lot more freedom to say what you want than you would with a big press, but nothing you say will have any impact on anyone or anything. Right this moment, why don't you go out into the street and just have a good, long look at your fellow man. (Make sure you pay for this book first; I can't live on 10% of nothing.) Look at the grand parade of witless meat, this collection of brutes and nitwits that represents the culmination of a million years of human evolution, the gene pool out of which the Future will be born, and ask yourself if this book--or any book--could have the slightest impact on any of these human insects. What a pile of stinking, mindless shit! I speak as an ex-liberal.

A former employer of mine, the publisher of a vanity press, once told a prospective author candidly, "Your book will have about as much impact as a feather falling into the Grand Canyon." I'm beginning to think that that statement already applies to 99.99% of the books published in this country. (On the other hand, if Joan Rivers farts audibly on TV, millions of people will be talking about it the next day.)

When a tiny percentage of the public patronizes bookstores, when bookstores are going out of business and are being replaced by delis for Yuppies and pizzerias for Neanderthals, when passers-by on the street cannot even read the words on my signs, when a generation of teenagers is coming out of high school in a state of semi-literacy, and when our society as a whole has had its collective brains sucked out by the mass media, pop culture, and the death-trap routine of production and consumption, then I'm willing to say that LITERATURE IS DEAD. If any of my fellow authors care to dispute this, I challenge them to take a bunch of their books onto the street and try to sell them without accosting people. Just wear some sort of sign and stand quietly and wait for people to stop and speak to you. I've been doing this in Toronto since 1978. The average person on the street has so much shit in his head, it would be impossible to affect him in any way, except that a lot of people would treat you like dirt just for standing there. In one of my old stories (not included in this collection), a character is killed by a copy of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason falling on her head from the fourteenth floor of a building. This incidental joke probably went over a lot of readers' heads. I was simply implying that a book might have an impact if it physically struck someone, but its contents would be irrelevant. And speaking of the 14th floor, I'd like to know why, if civilization has arrived on Planet Earth, elevators in high-rises do not have 13th floors designated as such. I'd also like to know why, in this country, I can't buy hard-core pornography legally, why Customs officials confiscate pornography (and take it home with them probably), why prostitution is illegal, why the government makes me pay so much for booze and tobacco, why the freedoms of speech and press do not apply to Ernst Zundel, and why film censors can decide what I can see in the movies. If there are any psychopathic persons reading this, I urge them to assassinate the entire Film Censor Board of Ontario. (See what I can put in print and get away with? Nobody cares.)

Almost nobody reads real books any more except for writers themselves, and they don't count. I don't particularly try to sell my books to other writers, which is why I sell my books on a busy street with a mixed population and wear a provocative sign to arouse what little capacity for curiosity still exists in this world. I want to be available to anyone who's interested, and I don't care if they're not connected in any way to the book business. In fact, I prefer to sell to people who have no professional vested interest to read me.

After so many years on the street I have drawn some conclusions. The population of Toronto breaks down as follows: 33% blobs, 33% snobs, 33% slobs, and 1% human. Now, 1% of the population of Toronto would work out to about 25,000 people. Unfortunately, the largest print run I have ever been able to dispose of in Toronto was 1,200

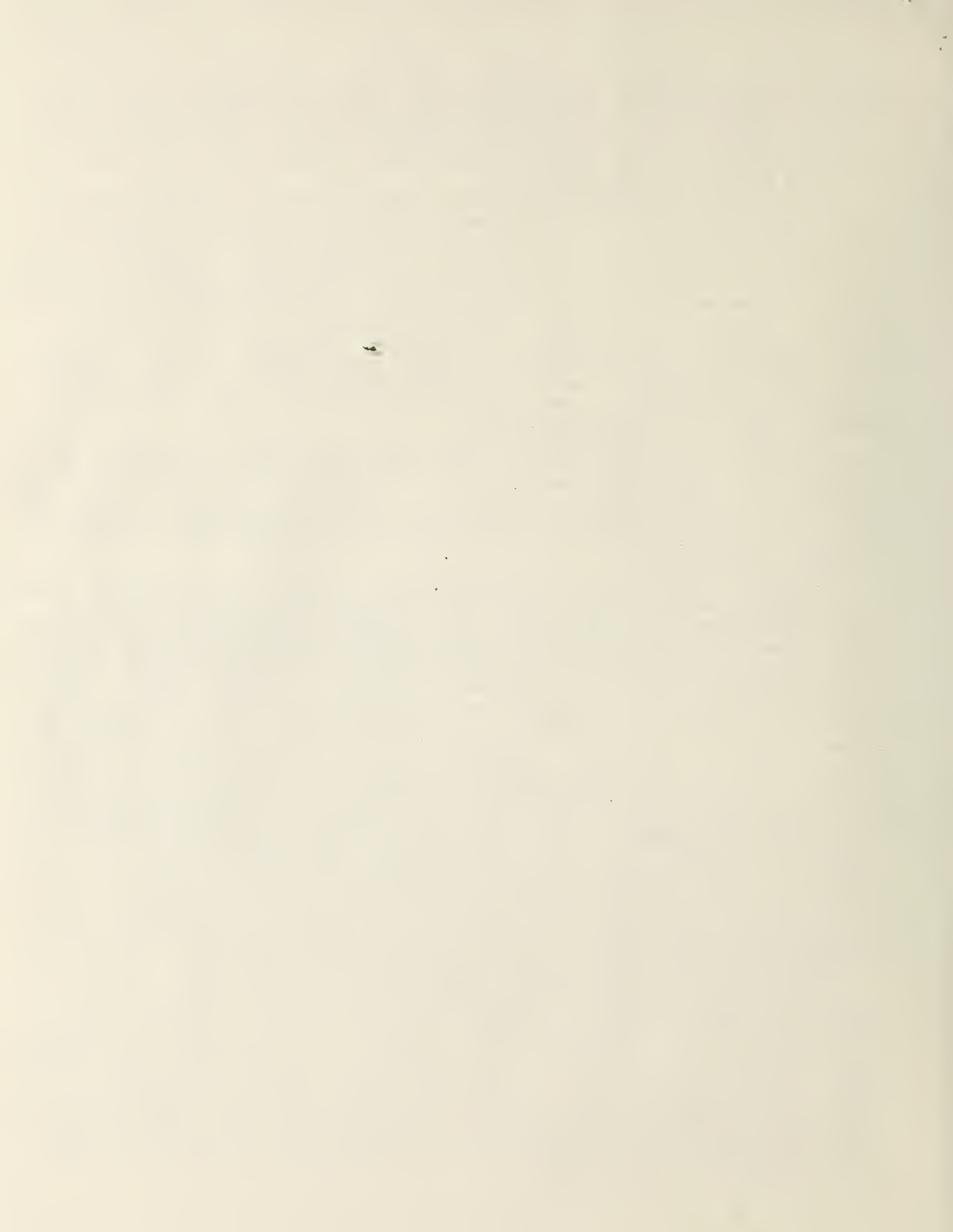
copies, and I've cut back to about 800 in recent years. Obviously, there are other factors working against me. On the other hand, if you can sell 800 copies of a self-published literary work in Toronto, you're doing pretty well. Sometime in the next century, literary writers will have almost no public audience at all because even now the kids coming out of high school are borderline illiterates and half the kids in university have computers up their asses.

Now, I'm going to change the subject and tell you about my landlady (as of February, 1987), Mrs. Evans. At this very moment, my life is being made intolerable by this hideous old woman, who, I'm convinced, is incipiently senile. I hope that by the time you read these words I am out of her house and in better surroundings, otherwise I'm liable to either kill her or kill myself. (Please check the back cover to see if this book has been published posthumously.) My friend Alex once said that if there was a God, why would He allow such a creature as the great white shark to exist? I have to ask why He would allow such a vile, useless creature as Mrs. Evans to exist? Or am I expected to take unending abuse, insults, and harassment from this disgusting hag (a church-going Catholic, wouldn't you know) just because she's very old and will die eventually? Apparently, I am. This whole introduction is being written under emotional duress. Not that anyone cares.

No newspaper in Canada has ever reviewed one of my private Charnel House editions, so I've told my publisher not to get his hopes up for this book. By and large, the literary scene in this country makes me sick. If I go on about it in detail I'm liable to get myself seriously depressed, although that wouldn't be too much of a change for me. I've been pretty miserable my whole life, I'm a social misfit, and I don't think I'll ever be happy as long as I live. (You never read an introduction like this in any other book, did you?)

I suppose I ought to say a few words about the stories in this collection. Almost all of them are reprinted from my older books, because I was in no mental state to write something new for this publisher. (If I survive 1987 he may get a new work out me next time.) Most of the stories appeared in small magazines (of the type nobody reads) before I used them in my Charnel House booklets. (Like Fran Lebowitz, I believe in recycling my writing; unlike Fran Lebowitz, I'm not an unfriendly creep.) I got out my little black book that served as my circulation record when I used to send out unsolicited manuscripts to magazines. I see that the stories in this collection received a total of 76 rejections. "Sex Slaves of the Astro-Mutants" got 24 by itself, although it went through a couple of small revisions. Two other stories, "Selected Potatoes" and "The Hard-Working Garbage Men of Cleveland," were submitted to CBC Radio's annual literary competition. Not only did they not win, they were screened out by the preliminary reader! As Henry Miller once remarked, "Who are these shits?" "Boys Who Like Tropical Fish" is the only piece that hasn't appeared previously in one of my books. I promised my publisher I'd give him at least one such piece. The collection as a whole is biased in favor of older work so that readers who have only met me on the street in the last couple of years will have an incentive to buy this book. All the Charnel House editions in which these works appeared, as well as Mental Cases and Lightning Struck My Dick, are sold out, gone for good, collectible, and very hard to find anywhere, and it feeds my ego to know they have all gone up in value.

I never reprint any of my private editions, for a variety of reasons. This anecdote illustrates one of them: I'm on Bay St. in Toronto's financial district one dull summer day in 1983. I'm standing there waiting for some sign of intelligent life. It's really the pits. I'm desperate to sell a book. The title I'm selling is Terminal Ward. This well-dressed creep who probably spends more on lunch than I make in an average day stops and chats me up. He looks at my book. It costs all of \$3.00, bear in mind. And after wasting my time, he says, "It looks too morbid for summer reading, but if you're still out here in the winter maybe I'll buy one." In other words, I'm supposed to stand out there and freeze my ass in the winter until this fucking asshole gets in the mood to read the book.




Toronto is full of scumbags like that. Near Holt Renfrew, a well-dressed man smoking a big cigar came by with a couple of his friends, and he stopped, made a dumb remark, shoved \$3.00 in my hand, grabbed one of my books, and threw it on the ground. Then they all went away laughing. Then there's this woman I've been bumping into for five or six years at least, who calls herself an international radio personality (her initials are J.D.). She has never once bought a book from me, but she'll stand there in her fur coat and say, totally without shame, "Oh, but I tell all my Yorkville friends about you!" A Yuppie asshole who wasted twenty minutes of my time wouldn't fork out \$3.00 for a book, but he gave me lots of advice and talked about his success writing books on the subject of making money. And in more than eight years on the street, I have never made a sale to anyone in marketing. I've met numerous marketing experts. Not one of them had the decency to buy a book from me, but I was supposed to be grateful for their advice. One shithead had some great advice: I should publish huge print runs and have my books in every corner variety store at 25¢ apiece, or I should become a jewelry vendor and just put some of my books on the table along with the jewelry. And this moron is getting \$700 a week advising corporations on their marketing problems! Do me a favor: if you bump into me on the street, don't give me advice. If you can't afford to buy a book, I forgive you, but don't utter the sentence "You know what you should do?" unless you are God.

I don't hang around with other writers. When I see writers huddled together in a coffee house or some other literary venue, I can't help but think of dogs sniffing each other's asses. I have no use for most of these pompous jackasses. I once went to a small press book fair at the urging of my friend Stu Ross, and I saw a couple of people there who were supposedly publishers or writers but who had been passing me on the street for years without even saying hello to me when I was out there selling my books. Last year at the Rivoli on Queen St., I was part of this group reading with four other writers, and there was one I didn't know personally although he had just gotten a terrific write-up in a magazine supplement to one of the newspapers. Okay, so I go up to this guy before the reading and introduce myself, how do you do, read about you in such-and-such magazine, best of luck with your novel, etc. A few days later, he passes right by me on Bloor St. while I'm standing there with my books, actually looks at me for a second, and then keeps going as if I'm a total stranger. During the next couple of months, he passes me on the street at least 15 times and doesn't bat an eyelash. Like I don't even exist, right? And now I see him on TV doing entertainment features for one of the networks. What an asshole! But plenty of writers who are far more distinguished and have been around a lot longer than this clown have also walked right by me on the street without so much as a little nod or smile of encouragement.

I also hate writers who make themselves conspicuous by writing in a public place. You know the type. They go out somewhere with their notebooks for the express purpose of finding some trendy place where they can scribble away furiously at some piece of shit and occasionally pause to put a suitably deep expression on their face, and they hope that other people will be impressed by this. I believe that writing is like masturbation: it's supposed to be done in private.

Then there's another breed you sometimes see at readings. He's sitting in the audience and shows his contempt for the performing reader by taking out a book and reading. I've been bored at readings plenty of times, but at least I had the courtesy to sit still and listen. There was a guy like this I used to see at Harbourfront a long time ago. Five minutes into the reading and he's already ignoring the performer and reading a book because he's so fucking superior and nobody else is worthy of his polite attention, right? I think this guy was a third-year lit student at the U. of T., and I was told that his forte was writing poetry in Old English. He's probably got a drawer full of unreadable glop and is just waiting for Old English to get popular again so he can be the first to cash in on it.

Too many of the wrong people have gotten it into their heads that writing is somehow glamorous or romantic and that writers are "somebodies" who command real



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respect. So you have thousands and thousands of imbeciles clattering away at typewriters, churning out crap like this actual poem that crossed my desk at my last job in the U.S.:

People

People are strange, yes they are.
They drive around in something called a car.
And many smoke something called a cigar.
Did you ever think they aren't up to par?

Without exaggeration, I have a boxful of garbage like that in my private files. If I'm in the right mood, I can enjoy it. Of course, if you cut that poem up into separate words and re-assemble it randomly, what you've got is post-modernism, and that means that there are at least 150 people in Canada who will regard you as a major talent.

The glamour, romance, and respect that writers supposedly enjoy seem entirely mythical when you have to stand on the street with a sign around your neck and peddle books that you published yourself. Not one of my private editions has ever been reviewed in any newspaper in Canada (I'm not counting the various little tabloids). I was in a documentary film dealing with self-publishing writers that appeared on TV several times, as a result of which I sold exactly one book. At the end of the film there was a mailing address so that viewers could get a list of the books by the writers in the film. Not one inquiry ever came in. My first "trade-published" book, Lightning Struck My Dick, was not reviewed by any newspaper in Canada either. An editor for one of the big Toronto papers personally squelched a potential review by one of his contributing reviewers. Send me a self-addressed stamped envelope, and I'll tell you this editor's name. My second book by a "regular" publisher, Pork College, did get reviewed favorably in several places, including the Globe & Mail. However, I sold more copies as a result of a review in one of the little tabloids than the review in the Globe. I also sold more copies of my own book on the street than the publisher did in all the bookstores in Canada. It was a hilarious book, but it never got submitted for the Leacock Award because the publisher "forgot." On the street, I have been spit on, threatened, insulted, physically assaulted, and told to get away from the building I was in front of. And as for romance, I have never gotten laid for being a writer (and not too often for any other reason).

I have worked for four book publishers in Toronto, although only one of them produced original titles; the rest were merely distributors. If you are a would-be writer, get a job in a publisher's warehouse. It will be a revelation to you. My first employer was an outright psychotic who never paid any bills, knew nothing about books, and whose main interest was in a Dairy Queen in Windsor. One of his brainstorms was to hold a series of charity book sales by getting various worthy community organizations to help promote a walk-in sale right in the warehouse and split the profits. We had one such sale--for a swim club. One customer came in and bought one book for \$1.25. That was it. This "publisher's" greatest business accomplishment, as I was told by a co-worker, had been to buy an option in sowbellies, which he forgot to cancel before the expiration of the contract, and as a result he got stuck with a railroad car full of sowbellies. The second publisher was a pig-headed Scotsman who guided the old family business into bankruptcy by acquiring a large computer (housed in an air-conditioned room), which promptly "ate" all the orders for the fall and Christmas season. As a result, we were packing orders the week before Christmas that should have been in the stores by November 1st. In the midst of this disaster, the publisher issued a memo to all his salesmen reminding them how important it was to write out the word "Limited" instead of abbreviating it when writing the name of the company. My third publisher employer had a warehouse that had been set up by two idiots, one of whom, I believe, was a relative of one of the partners and who was out of work and needed a temporary job. All the book titles of all the client publishers were scattered all over the warehouse,

and you could not locate any title without consulting a huge print-out book to look up the bin number. Nevertheless, when they put me in charge of order-picking, I had the work flowing like crap through a goose. Then this publisher decided he would improve our efficiency by installing a conveyor belt. He had seen a conveyor belt in somebody else's plant and he thought it sure was pretty. Nobody could tell this guy that it was a bad idea because he was only capable of having good ideas, get it? The conveyor belt proved to be a catastrophe. The work flow fell two weeks behind, and the order pickers spent a lot of their time trimming down cardboard cartons to put on the conveyor because the plastic tubs the orders were supposed to go in wouldn't ride around the curve at the top of the belt the way they were supposed to. The fourth publisher I worked for had more books gathering dust than I could stand to look at. There were entire aisles in the warehouse nobody ever went down except when taking inventory twice a year, and that was the only time most of those books were ever physically touched. Nevertheless, the publisher managed to move a relatively large volume of his more commercial lines with a minimum of employees, all of whom were underpaid. My greatest memory of this job is being docked a half-day's pay when I had to take the morning off to go to Citizenship Court and become a Canadian citizen.

I have lived below the poverty line ever since I became a full-time writer in 1978, with the exception of 1986. Over the long term, my standard of living has slowly declined. Nevertheless, every book I've ever published out of my own pocket has turned a profit, and I have spent no less than six winters on the streets of Toronto to get those books sold. Despite this, my shithead landlady (as of February, 1987), Mrs. Evans, says that I'm lazy, that I have no pride, that I'm living off her taxes, and that, like all Americans, I came to this country because I couldn't make a living in the U.S. (I have all this on tape recorder.) And I have to take this kind of shit from a 79-year-old senile bat because if I were to beat the crap out of her, which is what she deserves, I'd be nothing more than an evil criminal and she would be the virtuous victim. She gives me a highly illegal "eviction" notice three days before Christmas, and then she doesn't understand why I refuse to do her any little favors while I'm still here.

At the same time that all this shit is coming down on me, I have to look for a new place to live that I can afford, I have to get three other books ready for publication besides this one, and I'm on the verge of losing the woman I love (I'm a total failure in romance, I admit it). I'm drinking Deep South Liqueur and taking borrowed tranquilizers from friends so I can get a few hours of sleep at night. My "last resort" suicide plan was to run the engine of my old car with the garage door closed and gas myself with carbon monoxide, but I have to get rid of the car within three weeks because I can't afford to keep up the insurance and other expenses. It's a shame because it has less than 82,000 miles on it and still runs well.

Now, after all this, you're supposed to read my collection of funny stories, right? Fuck it. Who cares? As I said, I can write anything I want in a small press book like this because none of it matters to the world at large. I don't matter. You don't matter. The bookstore clerk putting this book on the shelf (or taking it off the shelf to be returned) doesn't matter. The book reviewers who sell their free copies to second-hand bookstores for \$1.50 don't matter. All the people at the next C.B.A. convention don't matter. As Shakespeare said, we're all food for worms.

Well, that's enough of an introduction. Hell of an introduction, wasn't it? What's that? You say I never got around to explaining "How I Write Such Great Stories"? Fuck it, I never intended to tell you anyway!

C.K.

